

## **Coping with PTSD**

Adapted from: A National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet by Joe Ruzek, Ph.D.

### **Coping with PTSD**

Because PTSD symptoms seldom disappear completely, it is usually a continuing challenge for survivors to cope. Survivors learn through treatment how to cope more effectively.

Recovery from PTSD is an ongoing, gradual process. It doesn't happen through sudden insight or "cure". Healing doesn't mean that a survivor will forget war experiences or have no emotional pain when remembering them. Some reaction to memories is normal and reflects a normal body and mind. Recovery may lead to fewer reactions or reactions that are less intense. It may also lead to a greater skill to manage emotions and to greater confidence in one's ability to cope.

When a trauma survivor takes direct action to cope with problems, he or she gains a sense of personal power and control. Active coping means recognizing and accepting the impact of the trauma and then taking real action to improve things.

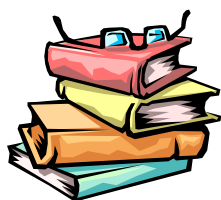


### **What are positive coping actions?**

Positive coping actions are those that help reduce anxiety and decrease other distressing reactions. Positive coping actions improve the situation in a way that does not harm the survivor. These actions also improve the situation in a way that lasts into the future.

### **Learning about trauma and PTSD**

It is useful for trauma survivors to learn more about PTSD and how it affects them. When survivors learn that PTSD is common and that their problems are shared by others, they realize that they are not alone, weak, or crazy. When a survivor seeks treatment and learns to recognize and understand what upsets him or her, he or she is in a better position to cope with the symptoms of PTSD.



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## Talking to another person for support

It is helpful when survivors are able to talk about their problems with others. Survivors must choose their support people carefully and clearly ask for what they need. With support from others, survivors may feel less alone, feel supported or understood, or receive concrete help with a problem. It is best to talk to professional counselors about issues related to the traumatic experience itself. Professionals understand trauma and its effects better than friends and family. It is also helpful to seek support from a support group. Being in a group with others who have PTSD helps reduce the sense of isolation. It also rebuilds trust in others, and provides an important opportunity for recovery.



## Talking to your doctor about trauma and PTSD

Part of taking care of yourself means mobilizing helping resources. Your doctor can take care of your physical health better if he or she knows about your PTSD. Doctors can refer you to more specialized and expert help.

## Practicing relaxation methods

These can include muscular relaxation exercises, breathing exercises, meditation, swimming, stretching, yoga, prayer, listening to quiet music, spending time in nature, and so on. While relaxation techniques can be helpful, they can sometimes increase distress. Be aware that uncomfortable physical sensations may become more obvious when you are relaxed. However, in the long run, continuing with relaxation helps reduce negative reactions to thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.



## Increasing positive distractions

Positive recreational or work activities help distract a person from his or her memories and reactions. Artistic activities are also a way for many trauma survivors to express their feelings in a positive, creative way. This can improve your mood, limit the harm caused by PTSD, and help you rebuild your life. Distraction alone won't lead to a complete recovery. Active, direct coping with traumatic events and their impact is most important.



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## Calling a counselor for help

Sometimes PTSD symptoms get worse and usual efforts at coping don't seem to work. Survivors may feel fearful or depressed. At these times, it is important to reach out and telephone a counselor, who can help turn things around.



## Taking prescribed medications to tackle PTSD

One tool that many with PTSD have found helpful is medication treatment. By taking medications, some survivors of trauma are able to improve their sleep, anxiety, irritability, anger, and urges to drink or use drugs.

## What are negative coping actions?

Negative coping actions cause problems to continue. They may reduce distress immediately but short-circuit permanent change. Some actions like smoking or drug use that are immediately effective may cause later problems. These habits become difficult to change. Negative coping methods can include isolation, use of drugs or alcohol, violent behavior, anger towards others, unhealthy eating, and different types of self-destructive behavior such as attempting suicide. Before learning effective and healthy coping methods, most people with PTSD try to cope with their distress and other reactions in ways that lead to more problems.

## Use of alcohol or drugs

This may help wash away memories, increase social confidence, or induce sleep, but it causes more problems than it cures. Using alcohol or drugs can create a dependence on alcohol, harm one's judgment, harm one's mental abilities, cause problems in relationships, and sometimes place a person at risk for suicide, violence, or accidents.



## Social isolation

By reducing contact with the outside world, a trauma survivor avoids many situations that cause him or her to feel afraid, irritable, or angry. However, isolation will also cause major problems. It will result in the loss of social support, friendships, and intimacy. It may breed further depression and fear. Less participation in positive activities leads to fewer opportunities for positive emotions and achievements.

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## **Anger**

Like isolation, anger can get rid of many upsetting situations by keeping people away. However, it also keeps away positive connections and help. It can gradually drive away the important people in a person's life. It may lead to job problems, marital or relationship problems, and the loss of friendships.

## **Ongoing avoidance**

If you avoid thinking about the trauma or if you avoid seeking help, you may keep distress at bay. However, this behavior also prevents you from making progress in how you cope with trauma and its consequences.

## **What Lifestyle Changes can I make ?**

Those with PTSD need to take active steps to deal with their PTSD. These steps involve making a series of changes in one's lifestyle to reduce symptoms and improve quality of life.

## **Calling about treatment and joining a PTSD support group.**

It may be difficult to take the first step and join a PTSD treatment group. Survivors say to themselves, "What will happen there? Nobody can help me anyway". People with PTSD find it hard to meet new people and trust them enough to open up. However, it can also be a great relief to feel that you have taken positive action. You may also be able to develop a friendship with another survivor.

## **Increasing contact with other survivors of trauma**

Other survivors of trauma are probably the best source of understanding and support. By joining a survivors group, such as a veteran's organization or by increasing contact with other survivors, the pattern of isolation and distrust of others will be reversed.



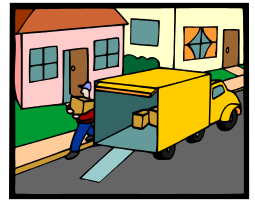
## **Reinvesting in personal relationships with family and friends**

Most survivors of trauma have some kind of relationship with a son or daughter, a wife or partner, or an old friend or work acquaintance. If you make the effort to reestablish or increase contact with that person, it can help you reconnect with others.

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## Changing neighborhoods

Survivors with PTSD usually feel that the world is a very dangerous place and that they will be harmed again. It is not a good idea for people with PTSD to live in a high-crime area. It only makes those feelings worse. If it is possible to move to a safer neighborhood, it is likely that fewer things will cause these feelings. This will allow the person to reconsider his or her personal beliefs about danger.



## Refraining from alcohol and drug abuse

Many trauma survivors turn to alcohol and drugs to help them cope with PTSD. Substances may distract a person from his or her painful feelings and appear to deal with symptoms. However, relying on alcohol and drugs always makes things worse in the end. These substances often hinder PTSD treatment and recovery. Rather than trying to beat an addiction by yourself, it is easier to deal with addictions by joining a treatment program where you can be around others who are working on similar issues.



## Starting an exercise program

It is important to see a doctor before starting to exercise. If the physician gives the OK, exercise in moderation can benefit those with PTSD. Walking, jogging, swimming, weight lifting, and other forms of exercise reduce physical tension. They may distract the person from painful memories or worries and give him or her a break from difficult emotions. Perhaps most important, exercise can improve self-esteem and create feelings of personal control.



## Starting to volunteer in the community

It is important to feel as if you are contributing to your community. When you are not working, you may not feel you have anything to offer others. One way survivors can reconnect with their communities is to volunteer. You can help with youth programs, medical services, literacy programs, community sporting activities, etc.

